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ABSTRACT

An educator at Bryant College (Rhode Island), a business-oriented college, sought to better understand the effects of gender as they operate within and through the school's writing center. Bryant College's female students attend a college with a student body of about 40% females and 60% males. The hypothesis in a study was that female students would feel more anxious about their writing than would male students in this male-dominated environment and that females would be less likely to visit the writing center at the school, as they might feel that they would get another "male" perspective on their less-than-adequate writing. Research involved the use of three sources of data: logs of student sessions (called consultation logs), 87 student survey responses, and interviews of individual peer writing consultants. During the spring 2002 semester, the writing center had 404 sessions with students--216 of these, or 53.5%, were with female students. Also, there did not seem to be much difference between the focus of sessions with female students and the focus of sessions with male students. Data indicated that female students were 16% more likely than male students to request a focus for consulting sessions. In general, consultants perceive gender to be an influence on sessions. Includes 2 figures and 2 tables. Lists 5 works cited. (NKA)

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ED 474 964

Does a Business School's Writing Center Encourage Students to Write Like Men?

Jean-Paul Nadeau

The opening of a Women's Center on our campus about a year ago reminded me how little I've concerned myself with matters of gender since grad school. When this new center opened, I considered the potential successes and hardships its staff would face. I thought about the importance of voicing and addressing women's issues on a campus populated mostly by male students working toward careers traditionally dominated by men. Clearly these activities should be fostered by the entire campus community, and so I decided to devote more time to exploring issues of gender in the Writing Center.

In fact, my original idea for this paper involved collaborating with the Director of the Women's Center. This plan fell apart quickly, however, as I discovered that there wasn't an administrative staff person assigned to the Women's Center. Though the College is currently working on hiring a part-time Women's Center Director, my talk today focuses on my own efforts to better understand the effects of gender as they operate within and through our Writing Center.

I began, then, with a fairly general research question: "Does a business school's writing center encourage students to write like men?" And this question evolved into something like: "Are female students at a business school learning to write in an equitable environment?" I assumed that my less-than-critical mindset had served to perpetuate the status quo, the dominant, patriarchal, business-minded power structure.

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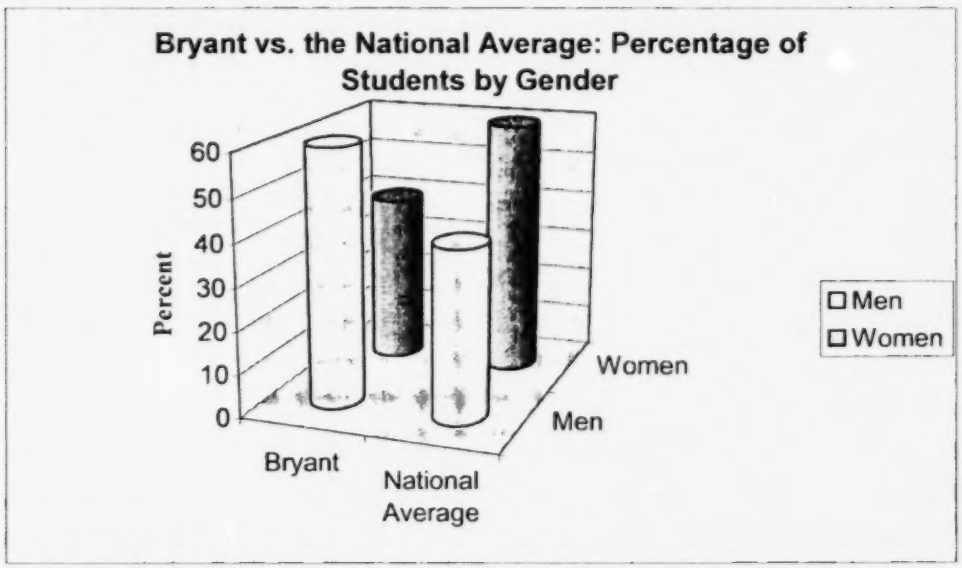
CS 511 915

The male-dominated world of business

The business careers many Bryant students are working toward aren't equally inhabited by women and men. Rene Redwood, executive director of Americans for a Fair Chance and past executive director of the Glass Ceiling Commission, explains that the idea that there's no longer a glass ceiling is a myth. She explains that, "...despite steady increases, women still hold only 1 in 10 board seats...Surveys show women executives...earning an average of $187,000 and men earning an average of $289,000 – a difference of $102,000 in average annual compensation." Bryant's female students are attending an institution whose demographics show similar disproportions. At the same time that the average college/university has a student body consisting of roughly 40% males and 60% females, Bryant's student body consists of about 40% females and 60% males.

Figure 1: Bryant vs. the National Average



I'd like to focus on that 40% of the student body, women who *do* take a chance on attending a school with a traditionally business-oriented curriculum. I'll deal here with the effects that becoming

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business literate have on this segment of our campus population and the extent to which our writing center is responsible for those effects.

Could our writing center be serving to erase difference? Elizabeth Flynn feels that she responds to writing in a feminine way by making encouraging comments and constructive criticism, something my staff is asked to do. She says in "Learning to Read Student Papers from a Feminine Perspective, I", "I now read student papers with empathy for the student writer and with an eye for what a flawed paper might possibly become with some work and some guidance" (56). But does this philosophy ensure that student voice will be respected, even, or particularly, those who seek to challenge, criticize, or question? Exactly what are we guiding students toward? How are we identifying flaws and toward what end? What are we criticizing or discouraging, albeit positively?

The discussion surrounding gender and writing has been going on for some time now, and in many fields. Feminists, composition and communication specialists, rhetoricians, and writing center administrators have been interested in the relationship between gender and language, gender and teaching: gender and literacy practices. Let me here attempt to draw from these conversations a foundation for my argument. To do so, I'll restate the title of my presentation: "Does a Business School's Writing Center Encourage Students to Write Like Men?".

Gender and Writing

The important question here, to begin, is what I mean by "write like men." This is an admittedly essentialist notion that presumes men and women have natural tendencies toward the composition of text. Many feminists make the argument that, if indeed there are differences in the way that men and women compose, that these are learned differences based on societal influence. Some suggest that to seek what it means to "write like women" misses the point, as to do so would be to remain defined by the same male/female binary and ignore the possibility that women can write "like men" and that men can write "like women." I use the question not to validate a flawed binary, but to

consider whether a business school's writing center privileges one side of that binary, acting as what Nancy Grimm would refer to as a homogenizing or normalizing agent.

The research I'll reveal shortly will hopefully help us better understand how students feel about writing in a business school and about visiting its writing center. My hypothesis was that female students would feel more anxious about their writing than would male students in this male-dominated environment. I also anticipated that female students would be less likely to visit the writing center at a business school, as they might feel that they would get yet another "male" perspective on their less-than-adequate writing.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" focus on "an 'anxiety of authorship,' an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex" (25). Though Gilbert and Gubar are interested mostly in the female artist, not the female executive preparing a business plan, I wondered if this feeling of anxiety might be more universal. I also wondered about the source of the anxiety: Is it that women have been socialized away from authoritarian roles and that they feel insecure when having to adopt such a presence? Is it that the desire to hold all authority is patriarchal, that sharing authority isn't a consideration? Does the answer involve a combination of these ideas? And others?

Other questions included: what can the frequency of writing center visits by each gender tell us about what is and isn't valued in regards to business writing? Does the percentage of female vs. male visitors suggest that one gender feels less secure about writing than the other? Ideally, of course, I hoped not. That doesn't gibe with the philosophy of our writing center. But student's expectations/perceptions are often quite different from our own. Other questions come to mind. Once the student has come to the center, can gender be used to predict the focus of the session? Do women request help with the same issues as do men? I went about collecting data in a variety of ways in an attempt to answer these questions.

Method

My research involved the use of three sources of data: logs of student sessions (what we call consultation logs), student survey responses (n=87), and interviews of individual peer writing consultants. Consultation logs were used to collect data regarding the focus of sessions, in an attempt to identify any correlations between gender and session focus. These logs were completed by a peer writing consultant or writing specialist at the completion of each writing center session. A total of 404 consultation logs, that is all of the logs from the spring 2002 semester, were analyzed. Students were also surveyed during the fall 2003 semester regarding their attitudes toward writing. Again, the results of these surveys were studied to identify correlations between gender of respondent and attitudes about writing. Finally, also during the fall 2003 semester, peer writing consultants were interviewed in order to identify their perceptions regarding the relationship between gender of student client and the focus of writing center sessions.

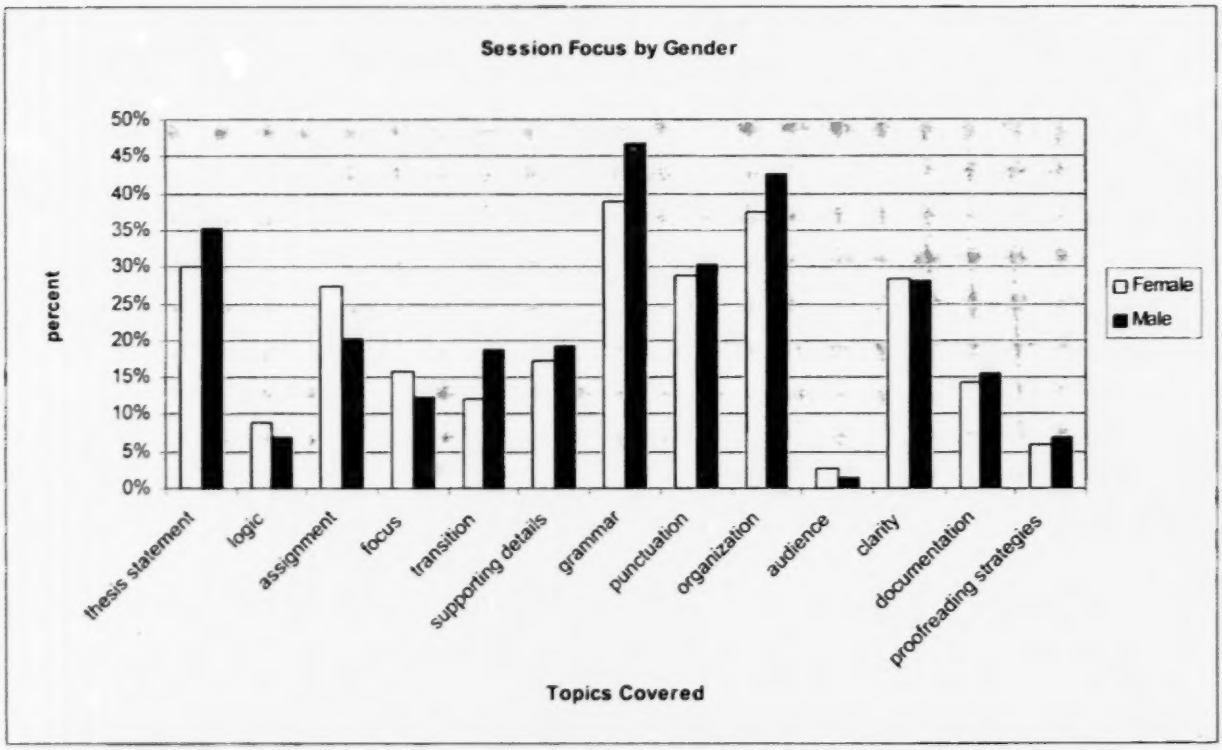
Findings

As I mentioned, during the spring 2002 semester, the Writing Center had 404 sessions with students. Two-hundred and sixteen of these, or 53.5%, were with female students. To confirm that these numbers weren't a one-time occurrence, I looked at data for the fall 2001 semester as well. During that semester, the Center had 933 sessions with students. Four-hundred and ninety-eight of these, or 53%, were with female students. These numbers are interesting because they don't mirror the breakdown of students by gender for the College as a whole. Forty percent of Bryant students are women, but they outnumber the men when it comes to meeting with a member of the Writing Center staff.

As indicated in Figure 2, there doesn't seem to be much difference between the focus of sessions with female students and the focus of sessions with male students. The biggest difference is in

the topic identified as "grammar." Here we have grammar constituting at least part of the focus of 47% of sessions for male students, but just 39% of female students. This difference, while quite possibly meaningful, isn't statistically significant.

Figure 2: Focus of each session during the spring 2002 semester broken down by gender



Female writing center visitors were apparently more willing and/or able to request that one or more topics be focused on during the session. In fact, the data in Table 1 indicate that female students were 16% more likely to request a focus for the session.

To look at the data in another way, males were essentially just as likely to request a focus as not to request a focus. Females, on the other hand, were 22% more likely to request a focus than not to

request a focus. We might take this to mean that female writing center visitors were more goal-oriented, or, perhaps, came to the writing center wanting to address particular concerns. This data also seems to suggest that male students were more unsure about exactly what they should be working on.

	Total	Male students	Female students
Requesting a focus	227	95	132
Not requesting a focus	177	93	84

Table 1: Data from the spring 2002 semester revealing who did and did not request a focus for writing center sessions, broken down by gender

Survey of Bryant Students

The survey attempted to gather information from Bryant students regarding their perceptions involving the writing they are being asked to do in college, in particular regarding the extent to which they feel anxious in response to this writing. Survey responses didn't indicate a huge disparity based on gender.

Table 2 shows relative means for males and females in response to the five anxiety-related ("related," not "inducing") questions on the survey. These means indicate student responses on a scale of 1-5, 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." While I will discuss these results in more detail in a moment, let me just say here that only a couple of the differences in means seems meaningful, and that none of the differences are statistically significant.

Question	Male Response (mean)	Female Response (mean)
I am anxious about my writing.	2.95	2.60
I put off starting most writing assignments.	3.56	3.27
Anxiety about writing has kept me from visiting the writing center.	2.31	2.33
Anxiety about writing has caused me to visit the writing center.	2.82	2.65
I feel confident writing papers for classes in my major.	3.64	3.52

Table 2: Responses to survey questions relating to anxiety

Writing Consultant Interviews

Interviews of individual writing consultants were revealing to the extent they suggested that a significant number of consultants believe that female clients have different needs and "qualities" than do male clients, and that the gender of the consultant factored in to these perceptions. Three of the eight writing consultants currently working in the writing center are male. Male consultants made similar statements indicating that male clients had more grammar issues than did female clients and that female clients tended to consider the consultant more as an authority figure than as a peer.

One consultant explained that female clients needed "overall reassurance" and were "more open to criticism" while males mostly needed help with grammar. The other two male consultants thought female clients had more "structural problems" than did male clients. One thought that "guys are more scared to bring a paper to you and are more protective of their writing," the other "males seem to be confident in their writing and less open to comment."

How do these perceptions compare with those of female writing consultants? All but one of the five female consultants thought that female clients had different needs and "qualities" than did male clients. The differences they identify, however, don't mirror those presented by male consultants. While one female consultant thought that male clients tended to need help with grammar, at least more so than female clients, other perceived differences surfaced.

One female consultant thought that female clients were more "structured in what they want out of a session, making specific requests for help. They come more prepared." This idea was supported by other female consultants, one of whom explained, "male students lack confidence in their writing, believing they'll never know how to write." This same consultant thought that female clients were more "specific about what they want, and were less likely to say, 'this paper sucks.'" Another female consultant thought male clients had a hard time expressing their ideas, though female clients were "more unsure of themselves and their writing." She also thought that "females were less likely to question advice, and were more agreeable."

As a momentary aside, I might note here that while it is interesting to consider the different perceptions of male and female writing center clients, it is significant, in and of itself, that consultants perceive gender to be such an influence on a session at all. These perceptions could certainly affect the focus of future sessions, treating clients not as individual writers with their own concerns, strengths, goals, and personalities, but as members of homogenous groups.

Discussion

As I have said, I am interested in discovering whether the writing center is serving the interests of a male-dominated campus population. My data suggest different answers to this question (as well as other questions!). It is interesting, for example, that more women visited the writing center than did men, and that, as Figure 2 reveals, there were no significant differences between the focus of a session with a male student and of that with a female student. The only difference, perhaps, as indicated in

Table 1, is that female students were more likely to request a particular focus for the session. The survey data in Table 2 suggests that women felt less anxious about writing than did male students, and that female students were less likely to put off starting a writing assignment. They also responded that they were slightly less likely to visit the writing center as a result of feeling anxious about their writing than were males. While they reported being less confident than males in regards to writing papers for classes in their respective majors, this difference wasn't statistically significant, so this data is, at best, inconclusive.

It is interesting to compare the perceptions of student clients with those who staff the writing center. The consultation log and interview data overlap in at least one way. Writing consultants thought that female students were better able to request a goal for a session, and this perception was born out by the data gathered from consultation logs. On the other hand, the perception, held particularly by male consultants, that female students were less likely to seek help with grammar, is only marginally true, and the statistical difference, one could argue, would not be obvious in practice.

Indeed, the results of this study lead to more questions. While it is interesting to note that more women than men currently visit the writing center, a future study might consider whether female writing center visitors are more or less likely than male students to return for future visits. Such an analysis might reveal the effects of writing center instruction in different ways. Who's to say, for example, that female students don't get turned off by their first session at the writing center, deciding not to return?

Most importantly, it seems to me, this research has reminded me of the importance of understanding difference and its effects on the work we do. Instead of working around difference, I need to continue to investigate its impact upon writing center practice: "Some might argue that gender shouldn't be an issue at all. But the trend is away from ignoring difference, and our efforts to be gender-blind or color-blind were, while perceived as fair and free of bias, not capable of addressing

diversity among people…Gender should matter to writing center directors—so that it *doesn't* matter to students when it is *not* relevant" (Birnbaum 7).

In the future, I might also take into consideration factors that I haven't here, such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Another factor I'd like to consider more carefully is the gender of the consultant, looking at opposite and same-gender sessions. I also plan on conducting discourse analysis using the transcripts of tutoring sessions. My hope is that this research can be a collaborative effort with the new Women's Center Director.

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